



Help Protect the LGBT Community From Meningitis

An LGBT activist seeks updated recommendations to expand meningitis vaccination.

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Earlier this year, outbreaks of bacterial meningitis cropped up among gay and bisexual men in New York and Los Angeles. Fear gripped gay communities in cities across the country as many men wondered, according to The New York Times, “whether this is AIDS, circa 1981, all over again.”

There was ample reason to worry: bacterial meningitis—the swelling of the lining around the brain and the spinal cord—is a lethal disease. The symptoms come on fast but appear very ordinary; in fact, they so closely resemble the flu that many victims don’t bother to see a doctor. This can have deadly consequences.

Thankfully, a bacterial meningitis vaccine is available that is safe and effective. Health departments in major cities sprang into action, recommending that all sexually active men who have sex with men receive the vaccine. Thousands did, including my husband and me. Because of these large-scale, LGBT-specific vaccination programs, we’re making progress in the fight against bacterial meningitis. For example, In New York City—where at least 16,000 people received the vaccine—[no new cases](#) of the deadly disease have been reported for months.

But there’s still work to be done. One of the most glaring gaps in our defense against bacterial meningitis is the fact that current vaccine recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) leave infants and children—the group with the highest infection rate for invasive meningococcal disease—dangerously unprotected.

The CDC meets this week to take up the bacterial meningitis recommendations, so I launched a [Change.org petition](#) asking them to expand them. [Sign the petition here](#). It’s important to vaccinate for this deadly disease as widely as possible.

No one knows this better than Julian Siwek, a queer trans man whom I’m partnering with on this petition. Julian contracted bacterial meningitis as a child, and while he escaped with his life, he lost

all of his fingers and most of his feet, and spent months in the hospital. He doesn't want any other children to have to experience something similar.

There are an estimated 115,000 same-sex couples raising children in the United States. Adding the bacterial meningitis vaccine to the CDC list of recommended vaccines for infants and small children will help protect LGBT families and prevent those children from enduring what Julian Siwek went through. It will also increase herd immunity to protect people with compromised immune systems, including those with HIV and AIDS.

There is no reason not to make the bacterial meningitis vaccine available for children and infants. [Please sign this petition](#) to urge the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) to do just that.

[John Becker](#) is an LGBT activist in Washington, DC, and the managing editor of [The Bilerico Project](#), an LGBT blog.

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